

HIGHDAYS AND HOLIDAYS.

BY JOSEPH C. NEAL, AUTHOR OF "CHARCOAL SKETCHES," "IN TOWN AND ABOUT," ETC.

UNDOUBTEDLY—we never meant to deny it—anniversaries are pleasant enough, in their way. It is true, perhaps, that if our wishes could have an effect in the matter, we might rather desire them not to come quite so rapidly as they do of late, thus huddling on each other as if the space between had undergone abridgment, and as if years, like ourselves, as they grow older, are liable to shrinkage. There is no audible call for despatch in this particular, and thus to mount the months upon a locomotive, to sweep by in such undignified haste that they are gone almost before we are able to avail ourselves of their services,—which every one must have observed to be peculiarly the case since steam became the fashion and hurry the order of the day,—is annoying to people of leisurely habits, who like to deliberate before they act, and to consider consequences in advance of the deed, instead of afterwards, according to modern usages. To our fancy, the slow year—the year in hoop, powder and buckles—in full decorum and expansion—was a much more respectable personage than such years as we have now; years which have changed the minut measure of their ancestors for a hop, step and jump, not to be set down as otherwise than an abomination. We hate to be jostled and pushed from our propriety, and though it is admitted to be true that "here to-day and gone to-morrow," is symbolical of human existence, this incessant bustle of preparation causes an absorption of the day in the morrow. There is no "to-day"—scarcely the fragment of an afternoon; nothing but beginnings and endings, without an intervening pause for thought.

Still, however, as you say—as all the world says—these anniversaries are pleasant things; not emphatically pleasant, but pleasant, with no particular stress upon the word. They will intrude into our company, you know, without ceremonious observances. It is not easy to shut the door in the face of old time, nor is it of avail to reply "not at home" to the New Year; and, in emergencies of this kind, when there is no help, we cannot probably do better than to insist upon it, downright—to ourselves and to other people of less importance, that the inevitable visitant is under our patronage, and has agreeable points about him. Marvels are to be accomplished in regard to such convictions, by dint of perseverance. Resolve upon it that you shall think so, and you will think so—sooner or later. Only want to think so, and the object is more than half achieved. We are very docile to ourselves, and in an internal dispute, inclination is so fertile in argument that it becomes "useless to talk." The fair lady at last confessed that John Wilkes had a quaint

—the aberration from the true line was too evident to be denied—but then, she had prevailed on herself to admire even his defects, and she qualified her unwilling admission by declaring that, to her view, "Mr. Wilkes did not squint more than a gentleman should." And so, these anniversaries are pleasant things. There is a little of a sinister expression in their aspect, no doubt—father Saturn is charged with a disposition to devour his children—but we will set it down as a peculiarity which is rather attractive than otherwise—a romantic interest, such as that which envelops gentlemen of the "suspicious look," who combine the bully and the beau in so just an equipoise, that they command success and enforce admiration.

No one pretends to assert, at least, that it is not a source of pleasure to meet with friends, on a festive occasion—provided always that we have friends and possess a fondness for festivities. To give and to receive tokens of love and amity, affords refreshment to the spirit. The heart is cheered by smiling faces and the voice of joy, and it is not to be disputed that dining well is a circumstance by no means repugnant to the ordinary constitution of human nature—not repugnant at the moment, though sometimes apt to entail remorseful reminiscences. There is a period also, in our terrestrial career, when the dance comes not amiss, even if we should chance to feel a little dull upon it, when the next day's sun peeps in at us; and, indeed, it may be conceded that all the incidents of the holiday season and anniversary return—very nearly all—are decidedly pleasant—bright to anticipate—happy in fruition, and well enough in the retrospect. Let us then look gaily on the approach of the "happy New-Year," when we rejoice by tradition, and take up the echo of old time, that it may reverberate to posterity. Our merrymakings now, are the connecting link between the past and the future.

We are told, moreover, that it is not the part of true wisdom to be strict in the analysis of our pleasures, and that he is more of a simpleton than a philosopher, who stops in the midst of his mirth to ascertain by critical inquiry, whether, after all, there be any thing to laugh at. And, in fact, if it is our purpose to extract from life as many agreeable sensations as it is capable of affording, we must content ourselves with being entertained, and not insist too strenuously that the cause shall be in strict proportion to the effect. Nor can it be regarded as altogether a matter of sagacity to pass much time in endeavouring to discover what we have to be unhappy about to-day. There are annoyances enough of the unavoidable and intrusive sort—vexations

which will, of their own impulse, be in attendance, independent of a call—without a recourse to the muster-roll of grievance, to select a pet sorrow as our special companion. And to search for a discomfort, merely to bring it in action as a means of self-disturbance, may be courageous, but it is, for the most part, an unprofitable exhibition of valor. There is abundant room for the exercise of the passive virtues, without this continued practice upon our fortune.—Nevertheless, there are occasions when fevers of this peculiar type have their advantages, and when, from unknown causes, be they moral or physical, a diffused irascibility pervades the individual—when we go to rest in gloom and arise in sulkiness—it is a wholesome operation that the disorder should be localized, and that some particular point should be presented, no matter what, on which the pent-up fury may have vent. For example, if a gentleman, in the morning, should chance to be overheard in addressing harsh and uncivil words to his slippers, and in speaking with unkindness and disrespect to his boots, those with whom he is likely to come in contact at subsequent hours, have reason to rejoice that the superfluous electricity with which he was troubled, has wreaked itself upon inanimate objects. A living creature has, in all likelihood, had a fortunate escape. The slipper anticipates a contention—a boot may have frustrated a duel, and deprived surgery of a subject. Should my lady apostrophize the unlucky broom, which careless hands have left upon the stair, or should she, in sparkling monologue, comment on other oversights in housewifery, which meet her early eye, do not repine at wasted energy or at eloquence scattered to the unheeding air. It is a mercy, though you think it not, and power remains for all needful purposes. Occurrences of this description are, however, but exceptions to the comprehensive rule, and are not to be elevated to the station of a general example. They are not to be pleaded, certainly, as a justification of indiscriminating cynicism, or as palliating the propensity to seek for faults and to spy out defects.

But yet, as concerns holidays in general—as involves the merits of New Year's days and birthdays in particular—we are little disposed to be capacious and hypercritical—but still, it must be acknowledged, with all due deference to sounder judgment and more enlarged experience, that when they are regarded apart from their fineries, and the sophistication is dispensed with—when they lay aside hat, cloak and feathers, the comeliness, as in other instances not lying under present notice, measurably disappears, and as they sit down with us quietly by the fireside, it would be difficult perhaps conscientiously to assert, that the sensation is that of unmixed delight, or that the satisfaction would have been much less had their coming been delayed somewhat—not from a dearth of hospitality—not that we are altogether averse to this stranger presence; but from a vague impression that we are not fully prepared for such distinguished company, and would like to be a little more economical

in joys of this description—not quite so many birth-days, and a thought less, if we may so express it, of the New Year. Let children be impatient—we can wait well enough; and though it be an axiom that time is money, we care not thus to exercise our arithmetic in its computation—like Hamlet, we are “ill at these numbers.”—The observant eye may have noted, too, that with its increase of chronological wealth, the world grows miserly in the accumulation of its anniversary amounts—that it hides them, as it were, in unnoticed crannies and disregarded chinks, and that, as the sum grows larger, it shrinks from every allusion to its doubtful riches, as if there were robbers here, to “steal our years away.” Nor can it have escaped intelligent remark that there are those among us—respectable people, not incompetent to a gig, if, indeed, they may not justly aspire to a pair of horses—persons not to be suspected, under ordinary circumstances, of a bias towards larceny, who do not scruple to plunder themselves of their historical position, and who, since it would be a work beyond their powers to suppress the First of January, outright, nathless do contrive to wink strangely when the day that gave them birth rolls by, as if they had forgotten its distinctive features, and felt no gratitude for the favour it conferred, in the far distant past.

Since such facts are facts, not to be controverted, how happens it that at these moments, a really reluctant people are called upon to rejoice, in assumed jollity and forced smiles? Is it done to drive away care, or is it, after all, a joke—an invocation to merriment and convivialities—we address the question to the common sense of everybody—is it a joke—we mean, a very good joke—a joke to make us frisk, and give us a spasmodic twinge in the side—to peep into the mirror, and to count upon the cheek and brow, the additional flourishes of time's villainously cramped penmanship? We speak not in regard to connoisseurship or dilettanteism; but are you, in your heart, fond of the study of these ungraceful hieroglyphics? Would you not prefer engrossments on other parchment? A majestic brow is admirable in a statue,—a fine phrenology may be a letter of recommendation; but it is yet to be made manifest that musings upon a wig, or meditations about the approaching necessity for a ‘scratch,’ ever provoked a smile in him who was compelled to entertain them. Lear thought it flattery—but he was singular in his opinion—to be told that his beard was white, and it would perhaps move surprise, if there were an issue of invitations to celebrate the arrival of gray hairs. There are methods to create hunger when the appetite is disposed to sleep; but why it should render us eager for comfits and confections, because another round has been completed—because, though the jubilant be a year older, he is scarce a minute wiser—nearer the end of his career, yet not a penny richer—as full of sin and folly as before, but with much less time for repentance and amendment,—would puzzle Abernethy himself to explain.—There is besides, a sad waste of gunpowder, and the loud rattle of fire-arms, hereabouts, and it may be ap-

propriate to let off a blunderbuss as the old year expires. There are instances, no doubt, in which that weapon would be characteristic.

Look ye, too, where comes the forgotten tailor, the neglected hatter, the unsought shoemaker, with a long line of others who have administered to your convenience—see them approach, not perhaps having ‘fire in each eye,’ but certainly with ‘paper in each hand,’ to bring you to a settlement—a winding up of old affairs, preliminary to a new onset. Do you find that funny, friend—heedless, thoughtless, perhaps cashless, friend?—Now, you perceive the moral of the matter—now, you obtain a glimpse of the special mission of this holiday; and the pecuniary settlement to which the time is subject, is but a type of the more impressive settlement which the recurrence of the day should impose upon us. If it be well performed, then, indeed, have we reason to rejoice.

It has struck you often, in moments of calmness and reflection—after disappointments and in grief—in those minutes when the flush of enjoyment had faded to a sombre hue, and self-estimation had proportionably subsided, that there were changes in your own character and disposition which might be made to advantage. It would have been resented, if another had said as much; for you then thought, and still think, it may be mistakenly, that these defects were only apparent in full to their owner. Still, however, the amelioration was resolved upon. At first, it was to begin “now.” Then came cares and pleasures; a little postponement was granted, and this great work, if we are not much in error, lies in the dusty corners of your determination, quite unfinished. Could you not take it up to-day?—a more fitting time is not likely to present itself.

Somebody has frequently promised—but, after the cautious fashion of Sir Giles Overreach, “we name no parties”—has promised very distinctly to himself—and there is no one with whom it would be more to his advantage to keep faith, that the

New Year shall find him, in many respects, a new man. Do you know such a person—a friend, a brother, a lover or a husband, who has done this, in the view of evil habit, of indolence, of ill temper, of any of the thousands of temptations and of faults which beset the human family? Strengthen his will; give encouragement to his weakness. He may chance to need it.

And then, it may not be too much to assume that, perfect as we are, there is no want of certain pestilential imps who find places in our train, and are ever on the alert for mischief,—saucy companions, of whom we would gladly be rid, but that they take us by surprise, and await not the chastisements of our regret—little petulances, which at times prompt us to wound those who love us best—small discontents, which seek expression in embittered words—unrecognized envies, which lacerate the heart and disturb repose, leading to uncharitable thoughts, and unkindly judgments—petty jealousies, have we not, rendering us unreasonable, querulous, and ill at ease? Such restless spirits swarm the air, causing endless complications of annoyance. Let them, this day, be summoned to your footstool, to meet discharge, and, above all things, let us impress it on your mind to scan their faces closely. They are adroit at a disguise, and often elude the most careful watch; so that we know them not but in their effects, and by the sorrows they are apt to leave behind.

If such be our policy, as the substratum of our merriment, and the undercurrent to our mirth, and if we can find nerve enough to accomplish but a part of what is deemed desirable,—if each New Year is thus assured of meeting with us so much wiser and, therefore, happier—for wisdom is but happiness, after all,—than any of its predecessors, we shall “better brook the loss of brittle youth,” and meet the onward tide of time with buoyant hearts and an unshrinking hope—satisfied with the present, and with no terrors for the future.